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AUTHOR Christensen, K. Eleanor
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ABSTRACT

Whole language represents only one of many good concepts about teaching reading to children, but it is not for everybody. Because whole language is a philosophy rather than a specific method, educational practitioners can incorporate different aspects of this philosophy to different degrees. If teachers think of a continuum of theoretical bases underlying the teaching of reading, then they can move along the continuum headed toward an integrated language approach (or whole language approach) at their own speed and in their own style. The strength of the whole language philosophy--its emphasis on language and language usage, both oral and written, used in real-life situations--cannot help but influence the everyday classroom environment for many children. As teachers consider the continuum of an integrated language approach, the teaching of reading will take a significant new step forward into the twenty-first century. (A chart designed to help teachers place themselves on the theoretical continuum is included.) (RS)

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Whole Language in Perspective: A Teacher's Continuum

K. Eleanor Christensen, Ph.D.
Assistant Chairperson and Graduate Coordinator
Department of Childhood Studies and Reading
West Chester University, West Chester, Pennsylvania

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Whole Language in Perspective: A Teacher's Continuum

Introduction

There is a wide variety of ways to teach children how to read. Almost 20 years ago Robert Auckerman described in detail more than 100 methods, systems, devices, programs, gimmicks and gadgets in the field of beginning reading. Today an updated version of the book would require an additional section on a new philosophy - whole language. Yet whole language differs from most of the approaches that Auckermans' text described, because rather than involving a method of teaching it speaks to an underlying philosophy which shapes teachers'thinking and actions.

Nila Banton Smith in her classic history of the teaching of reading suggested that time and again educational practitioners have found one area of overwhelming interest in teaching reading and given it special impetus. After time this interest in any given topic wanes and another area of concern surfaces. Today we have entered just such an era of special emphasis involving the whole language philosophy.

Whole language represents only one of many good concepts about teaching reading to children. It is not for everybody. But because it is a philosophy, rather than a specific method, educational practitioners can incorporate different aspects of this

philosophy to different degrees. If one thinks of a continuum of theoretical bases underlying the teaching of reading, one can move along the continuum headed toward an integrated language approach (or whole language approach) at one's own speed and in one's own style. For this reason, probably each of us takes away from the whole language philosophy different aspects at different times. It is a process in our professional lives, not a product.

Before considering what whole language is, let's consider what it is not. It certainly is not a stimulus-response type of approach in which the child is given a prescribed segment of the reading task to perform and then is given immediate feedback as to his success. It is not a traditional maturational type program, often in the past developed by basal reading companies, which deliver pre-selected developmental portions of appropriate materials, often in a multi-sensory format. It began in part from emphasis on cognitive thinking, the growth of intelligence and the development of critical thinking skills. It has grown today to encompass the total language process, especially reading and writing in the classroom. In short, whole language basically represents a new philosophy underlying the teaching of reading.

What then is whole language? It is a concept springing from the psycholinguistic movement based on the value of an integrated language approach to the teaching of reading. It suggests that reading can be taught only through use in meaningful situations.

It states that language acquisition must be integrated into the child's functioning in the environment. It stresses the importance of both the writing process and the reading process - in fact, it suggests that the two are really one. Kenneth Goodman (1986) has spelled out the foundations of the philosophy;

1. Language is used to communicate meaning. Comprehension of meaning or expression of meaning is always a primary goal.
2. Writing is a language process; oral and written language are very similar.
3. Language cuing systems interact in all four language arts areas. They should not be isolated.
4. Language usage occurs in authentic life situations. This context contributes to success or failure in reading or writing.
5. Life situations are of primary importance to the meaning inherent in language.
6. Risk taking, motivation, and predictability of text play important roles in learning to read and write.

With such a philosophy, a teacher (who knows her own children very well) can build her own curriculum to best meet her children's needs and interests. Cooperative learning as opposed to competitive learning, can play a major role in this curriculum. And of course the real-life situations in which language is used, whether they be literature, science, social studies, or whatever, play a prominent part. Art, drama, music, and the like are all integrated into a truly horizontal program.

Probably most teachers include some experiences in their

classroom which whole language advocates regularly build into their curriculum. Reading aloud, sustained silent reading (and writing), process writing, reading from literature; all are strengths frequently found in many classrooms today. A teacher wishing to move along the continuum closer to an integrated language approach should start with these strengths and build on them. He or she should gradually take more and more control of the curriculum by developing themes or core experiences which incorporate aspects of the whole language philosophy. A number of new books have been published to help the teacher move in this direction. Reading in Junior Classes, a guideline published by the New Zealand Department of Education, balances a pre-reading and beginning reading program with reading to children,shared reading, language experience, guided reading, independent reading, and writing. Editors Strickland and Mommons in their book on emerging literacy suggest inquiring activities, reading aloud and response to literature, sharing, shared reading and writing, independent writing and independent reading. Regie Routman describes her experiences in becoming a whole language advocate and Brian Cutting spells out how to get started with a whole language classroom. (See references.)

Since teaching an integrated language approach involves the process of change in one's own philosophy, the stages of this change are not all the same and vary from individual to

individual teacher. It is a learning-by-doing process as the teacher learns from the response of children in the classroom. It involves risk. The local teacher-support groups and networking activities of whole language practitioners are a strength to many advocates. Teachers should plan to join or organize such support groups as they grow with this process.

A Teacher's Continuum

As teachers move along the continuum toward a whole language philosophy, they will find themselves struggling with some basic questions both of a theoretical and pragmatic nature.

As each teacher considers where he or she stands on the underlying theoretical base, appropriate classroom goals and activities become clear. Teachers can use the following chart to place themselves accordingly.

The Continuum of Whole Language

Self Ratings of Teachers' interest/investment in different classroom contexts of an integrated language approach.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Would you be not interested, moderately interested, or very interested in each of these ideas?

Setting and Activities	Degrees of Interest/Investment		
	NONE	MODERATE	HIGH
1. The teacher should use real reading and writing activities in the classroom, moving away from exercises in reading and writing.			
2. The teacher should use a rich variety of print in the classroom, including real literature, moving away from basals.			
3. The teacher should use a variety of subjects such as science, social studies, music, etc. for continued reading instruction - moving away from dependence on content texts.			
4. The teacher should continually assess and reassess children by diagnostic observation moving away from standardized test scores.			

ANCILLARY FINDINGS/IMPLICATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM: Would you be not interested, moderately interested or very interested in implementing each of the following teaching ideas?

	NONE	MODERATE	HIGH
1. Within the school district curriculum guide, the teacher should become the major organizer of the classroom curriculum, relying on a variety of materials rather than only one published manual per subject.			
2. The classroom curriculum should be comprised of literature and other areas of interest (themes) exclusively with less and less of the use of basal reading and single context texts.			
3. The children's reading, writing, art work, drama, music, poetry and other activities should be incorporated into the curriculum while all skill books and ditto exercises should be completely omitted.			
4. Phonics should be taught diagnostically from individual children's needs and the context of reading and writing without workbooks or day-to-day teachers' guides.			
5. The grouping in the classroom should not be based exclusively on levels of reading achievement but rather on interests, knowledge of subject matters, friendships, and one-to-one shared activities.			
6. The children's reading progress and instructional level should be regularly monitored by the teacher using tools such as a running record.			
7. The teacher should start language experience and developmental writing in kindergarten and gradually do away with packaged readiness programs.			

Conclusion

Teachers interested in the theoretical implications of the integrated language philosophy should find themselves gradually moving toward the implementation of this philosophy in the classroom. Enthusiastic supporters of whole language today are advocating these changes; other classroom teachers, while they support whole language theory, do not feel comfortable doing this. For this reason it is clear that the intellectual challenges raised by the whole language movement are significant. Some teachers will adapt some or all of this philosophy while others will reject it completely and teach reading instruction in a more traditional manner.

As pointed out earlier, there are many good ways to teach beginning reading. Yet because of the new emphasis on whole language, whether teachers accept the philosophy or not, many teachers will take a second look at their own theoretical basis for teaching reading and in turn incorporate some whole language activities into their classrooms.

The strength of the whole language philosophy - its emphasis on language and language usage, both oral and written, used in real-life situations - cannot help but influence the everyday classroom environment for many children. As teachers consider the continuum of an integrated language approach, the teaching of reading will take a significant new step forward into the 21st century.

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